

The Big Flood of '55, Part II

A Once-per-Century Visitor Proves an Unwelcome Christmas Guest

by Sarah Weston

On the night of Dec. 22, 1955, the Rio Theater was showing "The Rains of Ranchipur," a flood movie starring Richard Burton and Lana Turner. Downtown, the manager of the Santa Cruz Theater announced at intermission that the river was about to crest, and patrons may wish to move their cars. By the time the second feature was over, they exited to find the lobby three inches deep in water.

After weeks of steady rain, the ground throughout Santa Cruz County had reached total saturation, leaving nowhere for the water to go but into rivers. Now it followed that path with stunning rapidity.

In the El Rio Mobile Home Park, residents who had recently been assured there was no danger found their neighbors chest deep in water an hour later. One couple took refuge atop their trailer for the entire night.

Others were not so lucky; some trailers were overturned and tossed randomly about, while at least one was carried away entirely, reportedly out to sea and to the occupants' deaths. Others took refuge in a neighbor's Victorian home. That neighbor later credited their combined weight with keeping the house from being swept away.

Amazing Stories of Devastation

Water began pouring down Pacific Avenue. At the Palomar Hotel, the manager opened his expensive glass doors to save them from damage. Instead, he opened a floodgate for water to gush

onto the street.

Debris of every sort began to drift, then cascade along city streets. A chicken coop, complete with chickens, floated by.

In Soquel, one young girl arrived home with her parents just in time to watch their Christmas tree and presents wash out the door.

Two women in downtown Santa Cruz were asleep in their cottage when the waters rose and drowned them.

Two more people were lost when a Zayante Creek bridge collapsed and they and their truck were swept away.

Homes floated or were ripped from their foundations and drifted in the current, to be dashed like kindling against trees or street lamps. Cars tumbled along in the torrent like pebbles.

Many merchants rushed to their stores to save what they could. Some were driven back by electrical shocks from sockets immersed in water, until the power went out for good sometime before midnight.

People splashed about in the murky water with flashlights and candles, if they were lucky enough to have them.

Telephone lines went down shortly after. With confusion everywhere, one Civil Defense worker later recalled, "People were located by screams."

The Soquel Bridge Busted

In Soquel, a mass of logs and debris more than 100 yards across began to accumulate against the bridge that connected the two halves of the town across Soquel Creek.

A crane was brought in, but it was able to remove only one log at a time, a futile effort. Someone suggested dynamiting the mess. Workers were on the verge of igniting the



Debris caught behind the bridge flooded Soquel Village.

charge when a PG&E truck rushed up frantically, lights flashing. Directly under the proposed blast site laid a 15-inch gas line. The crane was put back to work.

Acts of heroism abounded, great and small.

"I don't recall a report of a single incident of looting," said one witness with satisfaction.

Instead, people rushed to help where they could. Some rowed from door to door, looking for stranded residents.

A young serviceman home on leave was recruited to help move Greyhound buses out of the flood path.

The Singer sewing machine shop subsequently repaired any flood-damaged machines for free.

One car dealer lost 75 cars, but another was saved when volunteer effort moved the cars to higher ground. Police cruisers were strategically placed to act as radio relays for rescue efforts.

A refuge center of sorts was set up at the Civic Auditorium, dispensing soup. Others sprung up in Boulder Creek, Ben Lomond, Felton and Capitola.

Both the state and federal

governments declared the flooded landscape to be a disaster area.

The Military Arrives

Military helicopters, a recent innovation, were pressed into rescue efforts for the first time, plucking numerous castaways from trees and rooftops.

Fort Ord contributed the largest contingent of relief workers, together with much-needed amphibious vehicles.

Governor Goodwin Knight began an immediate statewide inspection, commenting that the Soquel damage was as bad as Yuba City, an area that produced 10,000 evacuees.

By morning water was as much as 14 feet deep in the downtown area, with 410 acres of lowlands, including a third of the city, lying submerged.

As the water began to recede, boatloads of the curious began plying Pacific Avenue, taking pictures. Highway 17 was littered with boulders and mudslides to the point of being barely passable, but sightseers cluttered the roadway nevertheless, hampering rescue efforts.

Incredibly, many people had passed the night oblivious

to the chaos, only hearing the news of the flood in the morning. One woman's first clue of anything amiss was when she stepped out of bed into a foot of water.

The Aftermath

During the night the western edge of the Soquel Bridge had given way. For more than two years the only way to get from one side of town to the other was to take the freeway a mile or two to the next exit, then double back.

Tragically, there was a report of a child of 12 or so being swept away from the bridge. Officially, the tally of deaths countywide stood at eight, but that only included recovered bodies.

The disaster was not without entrepreneurship or humor, though.

Rescue workers in Ben Lomond were momentarily distracted by 10-pound steel-head slithering down the main street, providing some with an unexpected bonus dinner.

At Santa's Rancho near Scotts Valley, a Santa Claus slipped and fell into a flooded creek as mortified children looked on. He was rescued.

In Santa Cruz, one young lad snagged a brand new pair of tires floating downstream, and put them to good use on his jalopy.

Members of the high school auto shop found ready employment cleaning out soggy automobiles, while some of their classmates sold damaged booze from restaurants out of the trunk of their cars.

The basement of the Court House Annex had been flooded, and some people later found extended employment

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scraping mud off and drying the records.

Ironically, the thing that was in shortest supply was water. The city's water supply system had been damaged, forcing rationing and distribution of bottled water.

If anyone had any thoughts about drinking the bounty around them, they had only to open their nostrils to be dissuaded.

Almost every recollection includes strong memories of the putrid smell that permeated the air. Reports do not indicate any associated outbreak of disease, but in some places the stench reportedly persisted for years.



Gov. Goodwin Knight, left, made a Christmas Eve visit to see the damage.

Years to Recover

As relief efforts continued over the next few days, the numbers began to fall into

place.

In all, 34 people had been hospitalized; and 350 households evacuated from within the city of Santa Cruz.

More than 42 inches of rain had fallen in the Santa Cruz Mountains in the period Dec. 19 thru Dec. 27.

Livestock and crops were destroyed in the Pajaro Valley, with erosion to the land alone tagged at \$329,000.

In the city of Santa Cruz, cost of damage to private dwellings and to businesses each amounted to roughly a million dollars.

Estimates varied, but a later FEMA estimate pegged flood damage to the county at \$40 million. Statewide, 64 deaths were reported, and a cost of \$200 million

in economic losses.

In the years that followed, bridges were rebuilt, either raised or redesigned with fewer piers to attract debris.

Levees were bolstered along the San Lorenzo River, though this raised cries that the once-popular fishing destination had been turned into a large, sterile drainage ditch.

An Army Corps of Engineers study agreed that for flood protection to be adequate, the river would also require constant dredging, an expensive and impractical solution.

The 1982 Flood

In the major flood that followed in 1982, river levels rose to within a couple of feet of the levee top, but did not

crest it.

This flood caused more damage than its 1955 predecessor, but most of that damage (90 percent) was confined to outside Santa Cruz city limits.

In 1955, by contrast, 90 percent of the damage happened within city limits. Still, the 1982 flood was not a once-in-a-century flood.

When will the next one come? Not for another half century? No one knows.

The best experts can do is estimate the damage if it does.

In the words of a city Department of Public Works document, "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates that today a 100-year flood in the downtown area would cause \$86 million in damage." ■

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